The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

OEDIPUS BEFORE THE SPHINX.
(See pages 169-170.)

The Open Court Publishing Company

CHICAGO

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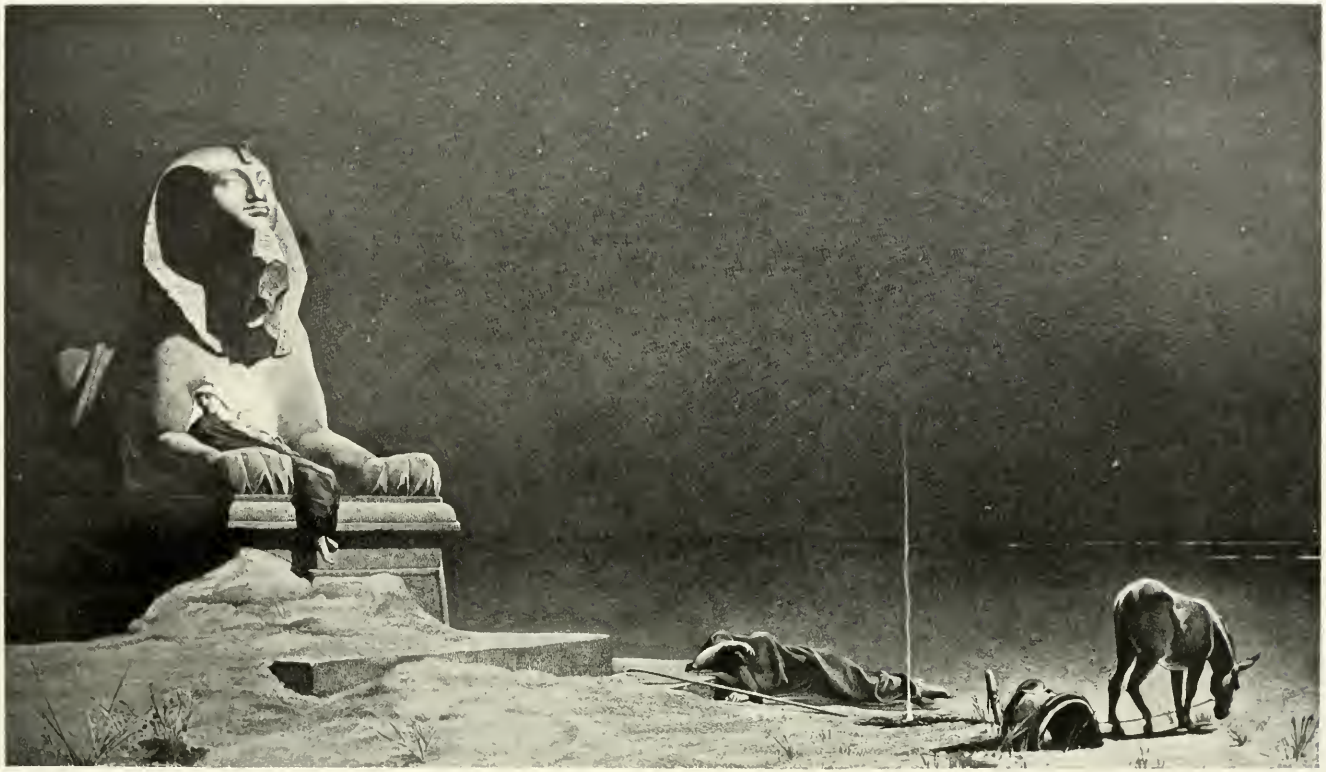

REPOSE IN EGYPT.

After the painting of L. Olivier Merson.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE EGYPTIAN ELEMENT IN THE BIRTH STORIES OF THE GOSPELS.

BY W. ST. CHAD BOSCAWEN.

THE first century, the age of the Gospels, is perhaps the most interesting epoch that can engage the student of history. The legions of Rome had conquered the uttermost parts of the earth and established communication with the most distant portions of her empire and seemed to her subjects to have united the ends of the earth. The thought of the east and west met, now in conflict, now in friendly embrace; and the stage for the enactment of this intellectual drama was Alexandria.

Alexandria was the asylum of all the old tradition of the Orient and the intellectual mart or clearing-house for the wisdom of the whole world. Here the romance and mysticism of the east encountered and blended with the precise thought and philosophy of the Greek world. It was at Alexandria that the school of Philo represented Hellenizing Judaism, and it was at Alexandria that the Gnosis synthesized all the thought of Syria, Chaldea, Persia and blended with Greek philosophy as well as Christianity and Judaism.

It was into this Pentecostal assemblage of thought—this world's conference of intellects—that the simple creed of the Galilean teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, was introduced about the year 70 A. D. The effect on this new-born system was such as might be expected; it did not succumb, but underwent such modifications and changes as to render it indeed a new system and better fitted for the conflict of the battle of intellects. Christianity came at an opportune moment and in a measure met a long-felt want and fulfilled a world's desire,

Of the atmosphere of the first century no better description can be found than that given by Zeller in his *History of Greek Philosophy* (Vol. V, pp. 391-392): The time was one of great strain, physical, intellectual and spiritual, a time when the nations had lost their independence, the popular religions their power, the national forms of culture their peculiar stamp, in part if not wholly; a time in which the supports of life on its natural side as well as its spiritual side, had broken asunder, and the great civilizations of the world were impressed by their downfall and with the particular sense of the approach of a new era; the time in which a longing after a new and more satisfactory form of spiritual being, a fellowship that should embrace all peoples, a form of belief that should bear men over all the misery of the present and tranquilize the desire of the soul, was universal. Christianity claimed to, and did eventually, fulfil this world's desire, but it was a Christianity modified in the fire of intellectual conflict, and equipped with weapons from many different workshops. The rapidity with which Christianity, with that strange faculty of adaptibility so characteristic of Semitic thought, became changed and influenced in the school of Alexandria is best shown by the rise of Christian gnosticism. Basilides flourished in the reign of Hadrian (117-138 A. D.) some half-century after the advent of Christianity and the change had begun. The school of the Alexandrian Fathers raised Christian thought to a height it was not to surpass, and which was to cause terror in the orthodoxy of the councils. Basilides, Valentinus, SS. Clement and Origen opened up for the Christian mind new vistas of thought and unveiled for it mysteries which a Plato or an Aristotle had never fathomed."

The heterogeneous and polyglot nature of the population of Alexandria is most graphically described by the Greek philosopher Dion Crysostom in an address to the Alexandrians in the time of Trajan (52-117 A. D.). He says: "I see among you not only Hellenes, Italians and men who are your neighbors, Syrians, Libyans and Cilicians; and men who dwell more remotely, Ethiopians, Arabs, Bactrians, Scythians, Persians and Indians, who are among the spectators."[1] The description of this orator is amply confirmed by the discoveries of Professor Petrie at Memphis, where he found statuettes of all the nationalities mentioned above and many others.[2]

In relation to the development of Christianity in Egypt there is a most important element in the religious and intellectual life

[1] James Kennedy on Buddhist Gnosticism in *J. R. A. S.*, Vol. 1902, p. 386.

[2] *Petrie's Discoveries at Memphis.*

of the period to be now considered, that is the religious life of Egypt at the time of the first century.

Egypt was *par excellence* the home of magic; and indeed there is a saying in the Talmud that "Ten measures of magic came into the world, and that Egypt received nine of these." The magicians of Pharaoh will go down to all time as pre-eminent wonder-workers. Egypt was also the birth-place of the novel or popular romance and many of these have been preserved to us. Such are the Tale of the Two Brothers in the Daubeney Papyrus, and the old groups of Magical Tales of Pyramid times in the Westcar papyrus, the Tale of the Doomed Prince and the Adventures of Sinuit, all of which no doubt formed part of the stock of popular literature of the land of the Pharaohs. Such literature took a firm hold on the minds of the populace. No doubt like most popular literatures, poems or romances, such as the Arabian Nights, these tales were for centuries handed down by oral tradition, until finally in some literary age they were collected and committed to writing. This age of oral transmission is common to all ancient literature; in India the Vedic hymns, the poems of the Ramayana, the Gathas of the Zend-Avesta of Zoroaster, all passed through this stage. So in Chaldea the epic poems of the creation and the story of Gilgames, are all stated to have been committed to heart before they took written form. So the legends of Arthur and the sagas of Scandinavia in our own western lands, not to mention the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, were faithfully passed from bard to bard ere they became stereotyped by the scribe's pen. Like all folktales these popular legends of Egypt grew with the centuries and gathered material from the flotsam and jetsam of popular tradition throughout the centuries; legends from all or any source being fish for the net of the popular raconteurs of Thebes and Memphis, and later of Alexandria. The vitality of these magic and wonder tales is unlimited, and when religion and priestly tradition had lost their power and faith grown dim, these popular tales survived when canonical literature had ceased to exist. The decadence of the Egyptian state religion after the fall of the Theban hierarchy of Amen, and in turn followed by the overthrow of the priests of Sais, caused the sacred literature of the Egyptian religion to be obliterated. The Book of the Dead, a vast compendium of mythology and magic, gave place to shorter rituals, such as the Book of Breathings or the still shorter compilations of Greco-Roman times. The twilight of the gods had set in and the priest gave place to the magician. Under the Ptolemies there was a great revival of the love of these tales, tales of the things

that those of old time knew, and such legends were carefully sought for and committed to writing generally in the Demotic script, the writing of the people. Tales of the wise men of old led to their worship, and in those days the wise man and magician were raised to the level of the gods, as I-m.hotep,[3] the wise medical man, architect and minister of King Zeser was deified as a son of Ptah, and Amen-hotep, the son of Hapi, the wonder worker and dream seer of the court of Amenophis III was deified in Greco-Roman times.[4]

Chief among the cycles of tales which were collected and committed to writing was a group which were associated with Prince Kha-m-Uast (Manifestations in Thebes) who had an immortal reputation as a magician and was high priest of Ptah at Memphis. He was the eldest son of Rameses II, the Pharaoh of Moses, and is said to have founded the Serapeum or tombs of the Apis bulls at Memphis. He is recorded in the earlier tales as spending most of his time in the necropolis at Memphis searching for magical books and charms. He is known to us, too, from several monuments and especially by a fine statue in conglomerate stone in the British Museum. On this statue is inscribed the XXXIVth chapter of the Book of the Dead, a great magical formula, a charm against serpents; and on the back the inscription is written in secret or magical writing and cannot be deciphered. Throughout the cycle of tales we find him mentioned by the name of Setme or Setne, a name derived from his title as high priest of the god Ptah of Memphis, but in some cases his full name and title being given there is no doubt or difficulty as to the identity of the priest-magician and prince.

Of the tales relating to this wonder-working prince we possess two manuscripts. The first is in the Khedival Museum at Cairo and was first published by the late Dr. Brugsch and since by Dr. Hess and more recently by Mr. F. Llewellyn Griffith, Reader in Egyptology at Oxford. The date of the first manuscript is uncertain, but it undoubtedly belongs to the Ptolemaic age (B. C. 323-300). The second and in many respects more important document is now in the British Museum and has recently been published by the Oxford Clarendon Press with a transcript, transliteration

[3] I-m.hotep was deified as the son of Ptah and called by the Greeks Imouthes and identified with Æsculapius. He became a special god of the scribe caste who poured out a libation from the water jar they used to moisten their paints before commencing their work.

[4] Amen-hotep, the son of Hapi, is probably the sage mentioned in the Logos Hiebræcos, a Hebrew magic charm published by Dr. Gaster, *J. R. A. S.*, Vol. 1901, pp. 109 ff.

and translation by Mr. Griffith, under the title of *Tales of the High Priests of Memphis.* Of this document we are able to fix the date with a considerable degree of accuracy. It is written on two large sheets of papyrus on the *recto* of which are written a series of land registers and fiscal accounts of the city of Crocodilopolis; and these are dated in the seventh year of the Emperor Claudius, that is in the year 46-47 A. D. The reverse of the papyrus left blank has been cleaned and on it has been written in Demotic of a very cursive character a series of tales of Setme Kha-m-uast and his magician son. Judging from the time of the re-usage of the papyri in the Fayoum according to Drs. Hunt and Grenfell, the interval between the two writings may be placed at from twenty-five to thirty years, making the date of the Demotic document 72 or 76 A. D. That would be from five to nine years after the mission of St. Mark to Alexandria, which on the authority of St. Jerome is usually placed at 67 A. D.

The contents may be divided into two portions: (1) The narrative of the birth of the wise son of Kha-m-Uast named Se Osiris and the wonders he performed, and (2) An account of the contest in magic and miracle between Se Osiris and the two magicians from Ethiopia, which resembles very closely the traditional contest between Moses and the two magicians Jannes and Jambres. The contest here described takes place at the court of Rameses II, an interesting point to note (2 Timothy iii. 8). The papyrus, slightly mutilated, opens with an account of the birth of the miraculous child,—Se Osiris. Kha-m-Uast and his wife are old, a fact which several references in the text indicate. The wife's name is Meh-usekht. The first complete portion of the papyrus commences with the dream of Setme, when we read:

"Setme laid down one night and dreamt a dream, they speaking to him saying, 'Meh-usekht thy wife hath taken conception in the night. The child that shall be born shall be named Se-Osiris, for many are the marvels that he shall do in the land of Kemi (Egypt).'"

Here at the very commencement we strike a well-marked similarity to the Gospel narrative. To continue:

"Her time of bearing come, she gave birth to a male child. They caused Setme to know it (and) he named him Se-Osiris according to that which was said in the dream."

In both these sections we have striking parallelisms with the New Testament, especially with Matthew i. 20, 22, 24.

"But when he [Joseph] thought upon these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 'Joseph, thou

son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost and she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for it is he that shall save people from their sins.'"

We may now pass to another episode in the life of this miraculous child during his youth:

"It came to pass that when the child Se Osiris was one year old, people might have said that he was two years and he being two years old they might have said he was three years. He grew big, he grew strong, he was put to school and he rivalled the scribe whom they caused to give him instruction.

"The child Se Osiris began to speak magic with the scribes in the House of Life [Temple of Ptah in Memphis]. Behold the boy Se Osiris passed twelve years and there was no good scribe or learned man that rivalled him in Memphis in reading or writing a charm."

Here again we are in touch with St. Luke's Gospel (ii. 40) where we read:

"The child grew and waxed strong, filled with the wisdom and the power of God was upon him. And when he was twelve years old they found him sitting in the temple, in the midst of the doctors both hearing and asking them questions. And all that heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."

The agreement here is not only verbal, but the incidents agree, the growth in strength, wisdom and the resort to consult learned men in the temple all are similar. In the "Gospel of the Infancy" we have the wisdom of the child Jesus mentioned. There we are told:

"At the age of twelve Jesus discourses to astronomers on the heavenly bodies, also to philosophers skilled in natural sciences."

This gospel is essentially a gnostic work.

In the story of St. Luke of the birth and infancy of Jesus there are similar points of detail which show striking indications of Egyptian influence. We may take for example the expression "the power of God." This is a most important phrase in Egyptian magic, the *nekht.p.neter* or "power of God" was the means by which most deeds of magic and miracle were performed. Kha-m-Uast by his skill in magic was able to call down from heaven the "power of God to aid him in his magical deeds."

So also according to the papyrus was his son Se Osiris able to control the power of divine miracle working. The ancient Egyptians do not appear to have had any idea of angels in the Christian sense, but the divine will and messages were conveyed to earth by the

Nekht.p.neter, who appears to have taken some immaterial or spiritual form and been able to perform such acts as passing through the water to divide the waters like Moses and to have been exactly the same in its functions as the Christian angel. These conceptions and functions of the "power of God" would seem to have been known to the writer of St. Luke's Gospel who entrusts the announcement of the birth of Jesus, and his forerunner the Baptist, to the angel Gabriel, whose name is an exact Hebrew equivalent of the Egyptian *Nekht.p.neter* or "Power of God." The annunciation of the birth of the divine child is also in touch with Egypt. The Theban kings claimed in ancient times, as did the Ptolemies later in imitation of them, to be the divine offspring of Amen. To make this known to their subjects they built at Thebes, Esneh, Philae and other great temples small temples known as "birth-houses." Here were depicted the events preceding and following the birth of the divine child: Khnum moulding the divine child and his double; Thoth, as the chief embodiment of the "power of God" and the source of all magic and miraculous power, announcing to the Queen Mother the name of the child to which she will give birth. Then follows the birth and the presentation of the child to his divine father.[5] One cannot read the New Testament account of the annunciation with a knowledge of these Egyptian beliefs, without thinking that the writer of the Gospel was cognisant of the Egyptian belief in the annunciation or pre-natal naming of a divine child.

There is another birth story of Jesus which must also be taken into consideration in this paper, that given by Celsus in his controversy with Origen. Origen writing (*Contra Celsus*, Bk. I, xxxii) says:

"The Jew of Celsus, speaking of the mother of Jesus, says when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera." In the Talmud we get some further details for the story of the supposed Jew of Celsus based on Talmudic legends. The passages are obscure: He was not the son of Stada (Joseph?) but was the son of Pandora." Rab. Chisda says: "The husband of Jesus's mother was Stada but her lover was Pandora." In the Talmud also Miariam, the mother of Jesus, is called Miriam, the hairplaiter or tirewoman (Magdil'ya). It is this last expression that

[5] Lyayet, "Le Temple de Luxor." *Mémoires de la Mission Française au Caire.* Pt. XV, pp. 62, 68, 75.

helps us to a clue to the source of the story of Celsus. In the Gospel narrative Mary the mother of Jesus is lost sight of after the night of the crucifixion when St. John took her to his own home (John xix. 27) but in Jewish and Christian legend the place of the Virgin Mary is taken by Mary Magdalene, who became the center of a large cycle of legend and most of these legends are derived from the stories of Isis, who became, at least in Egyptian Christianity, the Virgin. Lagarde suggested some years ago that the name of Mary Magdalene was not derived from a somewhat mythical town of Magdala but was connected with the Hebrew word *Magdila'ya,* "the hair-plaiter" derived from *magdila,* "braider," from *gadal,* "to plait or twist." Considered in the light of Egyptian Isis stories this becomes perfectly tenable.

There is a story of Isis which must be quoted here. It is true we do not possess the ancient Egyptian version of the story but the substance of the authoritative narrative is so well confirmed otherwise by the monuments that we may conclude that the statements are based on some Egyptian authority—either monumental or on a papyrus not yet recovered. Plutarch in his treatise on *Isis and Osiris* gives this legend: "Isis having heard that the chest in which Osiris was enclosed had been carried by the waves of the sea to the coast of Byblos (not the Phenician city but a town in the Nile Delta) hastened thither. On arriving there she sat herself down beside a well and refused to speak to any excepting the queen's women who happened to be there; these indeed she saluted and caressed with kindest manner *plaiting their hair for them* and transmuting into them part of the wonderful grateful odor which issued from her own body." Here, then, I believe we see clearly the source of the "Miriam, the tirewoman" of the Talmud and the Jew of Celsus in the Egyptian legend of Isis quoted by Plutarch of which we do not as yet possess the original.

Many suggestions have been made for the name of the supposed father, Pandera or Panthera. Some see in it a play on the Greek *parthenos* (παρθένος), "virgin," but this is hardly tenable, as it requires a reversal of the order of the consonants. Others connect it with the panther (πανδηρᾶν) sacred to Dionysus and regarded as an emblem of sensualism and suitable to the adulterous intercourse of Miriam and the soldier.

Another solution, I submit, can be found from an Egyptian sense, and as we see from the epithet "tirewoman" the Talmudic writer was not acquainted with Egyptian folklore. In the Kha-m-Uast papyrus which is the basis of this article, the wonder-working

child is called "Se-Osiris," son of Osiris. This name is a name of the son of Osiris and Isis, but not frequently used, he generally being called Heru-se.Asi or Horus the son of Isis which passed into Greek and later Egyptian as Horsesi. In Ptolemaic and in Christian times Osiris was called *p'neter,* "the god," or *p'neter aā,* "the great god," and indeed this title was often used instead of his full name. Thus in the stela of Ta.hebt of Ptolemaic times, formerly in the collection of Lady Meux, the deceased lady is made to say, "From the days of childhood I walked in the path of the God (Osiris) upright as Ra." This path is explained by the beautiful hymn to Osiris in the XVth chapter of the Book of the Dead, which takes the form of a litany with the repeated refrain, "Show thou me a path whereon I may walk in peace for I am just and true." To the Egyptian of the centuries preceding and in the early ages of the Christian church in Egypt Osiris was "the god." The explanation of Panthera orPandora seeems to be perfectly clear in this Egyptian light.

We take the general title of Osiris *p'neter-aa,* "the great god," and we have the essential radical of Panthera, P N T R A, and even the final A is long, being the Egyptian *aā,* "great"; Horus or Se-Osiris was the son of Isis the "hair-plaiter" by Osiris *P'neter-aā.*

In regard to the birth stories in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke, the verbal and incidental parallels are so striking as not to be easily explained away as coincidences. It is to be noticed that in the parallelism quoted above there is not one associated with the Gospel of St. Mark, only with St. Matthew and St. Luke.

Now if, as I believe, the writer of St. Luke's Gospel was a Greek-speaking Christian, the parallels would be quite possible from the existing material around him, the stories of Setme Kha-m-uast and his wonder-working child Se-Osiris must have been as well known to Alexandrians and Christian Egyptians as the stories of Antar or the Arabian Nights are to the modern dwellers in Cairo and Alexandria.

When we consider the atmospheres of the early days of Christianity in Egypt such a utilization of Egyptian material would seem not at all impossible. St. Mark left Rome on his mission to Alexandria about B. C. 67 taking with him, as St. Jerome states, a simple or elementary gospel—the *Ur-Mark* of the German critics of which we have an enlarged edition of the first Gospel. Both St. Matthew and St. Luke knew of and used this ground text and enlarging elaborated it in text and in incidents. If the date of the papyrus of

Kha-m-Uast is A. D. 74 or 76 as I make it, the tales would be accessible to both writers, but not to St. Mark, except in oral form.

St. Mark went to Alexandria to the Hellenist Jew community who had, as instanced by Apollos the Alexandrian Jew, received some elementary instruction in the way of the Lord, and it was the Greek-speaking Jews who founded the first Christian church. After a time the native Egyptian population, of whom some knew Greek, would be attached and desire to know something of the new and wonderful faith; they would be followed in due course by the non-Greek-speaking people, whose language was Coptic and a demand arose for translations of a simple gospel story of the life and death of Jesus and the scriptures which testified to him. By the latter part of the second century, when bishops were appointed and the native congregations had native teachers, this demand became very general, and by the third century a great literary activity had been developed in the native Coptic church. Of this activity we are now reaping the fruit in the valuable Coptic translations of the Scriptures which are being recovered from the earliest Christian cemeteries of Egypt, such as the versions of the books of Deuteronomy and Isaiah and the Acts of the Apostles, recently published by that great Coptic scholar, Dr. Budge of the British Museum. These works cannot be assigned to a later date than the latter part of the third century A. D.

The native Egyptians when they did become cognisant of the teaching of Christianity embraced it in no lukewarm manner; they threw themselves *en masse* into the arms of the church. They did not, however, wholly abandon their old creed and its beliefs. This strange compromise between the old religion and the new lasted for a long time and left its mark indelibly on the literature of the period. The Christian hell changed nothing of the Egyptian Amenti in the west of Heaven with its rivers and lakes of fire, to punish and purify the wicked, and the visit to Amenti is a stock incident in every Coptic saint's life or in the denunciations of Coptic homilies. The judgment still took place in Amenti with Osiris the great god seated on his throne and Anubis standing by the scale, with Thoth, the scribe of the gods recording the verdict and Amma, the composite devourer waiting to destroy for ever the damned. The Egyptian Christians still honored the old creed by calling themselves by names compounded with those of the old Theban gods. Thus Pachomius, the founder of one of the largest monasteries with 1300 monks is Pa-Khnum, after the creator god of the cataracts, the ram-headed divinity. Others like Serapamon, a com-

pound of Osiris, Hapi and Amen; Pet-Osiris, the gift of Osiris; or Pet.Bast, gift of Bast; or Horsesi, Horus, son of Isis. The great Coptic saint Shenuti has a name the exact equivalent of Se-Osiris for it is but the Coptic form of *Se-neter,* "son of the god," "son of Osiris."

To put the matter in plain terms, in adopting the Christian creed the native Egyptians of the first century, had little to renounce and nothing to learn. How close the conception of Osiris approached that of the Christian Christ is now evident.

The rule of the later Egyptian life was to follow in the path of Osiris, to do that which he did, thinking thus to attain eternal life. The belief in the god-man who died and rose again from the dead and who thereby opened the way to eternal life was the faith in which millions on millions of true believers had died in past time in Egypt.

"Osiris," says Dr. Budge,[6] "only obtained the sovereignty of Heaven and life among the gods, because of his innocence from evil, his surpassing merit, and he who wished to enter Heaven must be innocent, just and righteous. He must have done as Osiris did, set right in the place of wrong, as far as in his power lay. His hand must have been purified by the Matter of his seat (Osiris). A man must have lived in such a way that it could be said of him as was said of Osiris, He hath done no evil." Had the native convert anything to learn in accepting the doctrine of the risen Christ through whom men gained eternal life? He believed that in Heaven he would have a perpetual communion with the Saviour, be it Osiris or Christ, feed to all eternity on the bread which was incorruptible, because it proceeded from the body of Osiris and drink the wine which came from the body of God.

In an atmosphere such as this it is not surprising that the writers of these gospels, who had a groundwork in the writings of St. Mark and were familiar with the story of the life of Jesus, should utilize the material of Egyptian origin about them in their accounts which in the first case were to appeal to their fellow Greek-speaking Egyptians. The opinion I have come to and set forth as clearly as possible in the above pages, is the result of more than twenty years' study, and I am convinced that not only these two gospels are derived from Egypt, but the same is true of a large element in all Christian teaching.

[6] *Osiris and the Resurrection,* Vol. I, p. 313.